Summer 1981

Peirce's Critique of Hegel's Phenomenology and Dialectic

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Recommended Citation

Shapiro, Gary. "Peirce's Critique of Hegel's Phenomenology and Dialectic." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 17, no. 3 (Spring 1981): 269-75.

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Although Peirce clearly and repeatedly stated his intention to construct a philosophical system, each of his attempts in that direction is at best fragmentary and some are ultimately incoherent. The ambiguities of Peirce's cosmology, his theory of meaning and his conception of truth cannot be avoided by anyone who carefully considers his own "guess at the riddle." Rather than cataloguing these puzzles, I hope to give at least a partial account of why they remain in the work of a philosopher who was avowedly systematic, possessed great analytic and synthetic powers, and had an acute sense of the physiognomy of the major schools of philosophy. My account will be somewhat indirect, and therefore partial, because it attempts to acquire some perspective on Peirce's own philosophical method by considering his criticism of Hegel. Like many others, Peirce regards Hegel as *the* systematic philosopher of the nineteenth century. In reviewing the great philosophical systems of the past he goes further than this by mentioning only two of independent significance, the Aristotelian (with alterations by "Descartes, Hobbes, Kant and others"!) and "the new Schelling-Hegel mansion, lately run up in the German taste, but with such oversights in its construction that it is already pronounced uninhabitable" (1.1).[1] Although the uninhabitable mansion is elsewhere said to be "a pasteboard model of a philosophy that in reality does not exist" (6.305), Peirce also declares that it is closely allied to pragmaticism, differing from it in its denial of the categories of Firstness and Secondness (5.436). Among the aspects of Hegel's system which Peirce explicitly found congenial are evolutionism, the denial of an unknowable thing-in-itself, a recognition of the principle of continuity, objective idealism, and triadic structure. In some areas, such as the conception of the *summum bonum* and the attempt to construct a non-dualistic account of thought and action, there are additional deep similarities which Peirce did not remark. Why then does Peirce pronounce Hegelianism to be the mere sketch of a philosophical system? Aside from the general charge that Hegel was weak in mathematics and formal logic, Peirce offers a detailed critique of Hegel's phenomenology and categorial system and of his conception of philo-

sophical method; and it is these critiques, dealing with philosophical architectonic and procedure which we shall examine. In each area Peirce is inconsistent and one side of his thought is closer to Hegel than he was able to acknowledge.

Peirce sometimes praises Hegel for recognizing a triadic set of categories like his own while at other times (and more frequently) he complains of Hegel's neglect of quality, immediacy and chance (Firstness) or of shock, compulsion, and duality (Secondness). In a diagrammatic discussion of the types of philosophy in terms of Peirce's categories, Hegel is said to recognize only Thirdness (law, generality or thought), and he is accused of challenging the "independent and irrefutable standings in thought" of the other categories by maintaining that "Firstness and Secondness must somehow be *aufgehoben*" (5.77n., 5.91). Although there are several problems of method and interpretation to be analyzed here, Peirce's general charge that Hegel ignores or neglects Firstness and Secondness is an exaggeration which needs to be corrected. As for Firstness, Hegel claims at the beginning of his *Science of Logic* "that there is nothing, nothing in the heavens or in nature or in the spirit or anywhere which does not contain both immediacy and mediation." Here immediacy is not denied but declared to be omnipresent; that it is manifested in connection with mediation does raise a problem which will be considered in discussing the nature of *Aufhebung*. Secondness, identified phenomenologically as struggle or shock, is also a universal aspect of finite things for Hegel, although he calls it dialectic; it is ironic that while some have found his suggestion that there are existential contradictions absurd, Peirce supposes that Hegel fails to recognize "the outward clash." Although according to Peirce it is the three stages of Hegel's logic — being, essence, and thought — which are his closest approximation to his own categories, a better analogy would be the larger structure of Logic, Nature and Spirit. Logic is the Idea simply in itself, Nature is the Idea outside of itself or in externality, and Spirit is the Idea which has returned to itself through Nature. Yet to the extent that Logic and Nature are the Firstness and Secondness of Thirdness and not pure Firstness and Secondness, Peirce's interpretation of Hegel is plausible, for the two trichotomies are disanalogous. However, the Hegelian triad is not a phenomenological division but the structure of a system of philosophy which aims at the fullest possible explanation.

Since both Peirce and Hegel take phenomenology to be essentially prior to systematic philosophy, we need to inquire into the status of the

categories in their phenomenologies. Peirce, perhaps with his own procedure in mind, says that Hegel's phenomenology is indeed the source of his categories but that the actual categorial system of the *Phenomenology of Mind* is misconceived, especially in its view of immediacy or presentness as the most abstract of the categories (5.38, 5.44). Peirce's Firstness, which he takes to be analogous is concrete, positive and is just what it is and not another thing. Peirce apparently has in mind Hegel's analysis of sense-certainty, the initial stage of consciousness examined in his *Phenomenology*. However Hegel's intent is not to describe immediacy as a general form of consciousness or, in Peircean language, as what "is in any way or in any sense present to the mind" (1.284), but to consider whether the consciousness of immediacy is at the same time a valid cognitive stance. Peirce's failure to see this is surprising for it is surely one of the crucial themes of his epistemology to deny that there can be any immediate or intuitive knowledge and to insist that cognition necessarily involves signs or Thirds. The deficiency which Hegel's analysis of sense-certainty reveals is not in immediacy as such but in the attitude of mind which confuses immediacy and knowledge. The *Phenomenology of Mind* itself is not an attempt to elucidate the indecomposable elements of the appearances (or phanera) as such, but corresponds to Peirce's *Search For a Method*: both review various conceptions of scientific and philosophical method in order to discover one which is universally and absolutely valid. In so far as Hegel has a general phenomenology in Peirce's sense, it is a part of his *philosophy* of subjective mind, and there he does recognize a "monadic" state of "sensitive individuality" analogous to Peircean Firstness and a variety of conscious states which involve duality, ranging from self-feeling, in which the subject is aware of its own separation from its particular feelings to "practical feeling" which marks the discrepancy between the ideal and the actual with its dualistic "ought."[2]

If Hegelian and Peircean phenomenology are not strictly comparable, while Hegel seems to recognize analogues of Firstness and Secondness, Peirce's critique seems to be reduced to the claim that the Hegelian idea of *Aufhebung* somehow negates any such recognition. It is correct to say, as Peirce does, that immediacy and contradiction are *aufgehoben* in Spirit, or being and essence in the notion). But since Hegel insists that this *Aufhebung* is as much a preserving as a dissolving, Peirce's contention that Hegelian triads are really monads, leaving his own pragmaticism as a more genuinely triadic system of philosophy, is a pre-

mature judgment. The immediate and the contradictory do not disappear in the Absolute but find their explanation there. In fact Hegel's philosophy of nature requires that nature be in large part contingent and accidental; the particular contingencies of nature are not abolished by Spirit but it is undertsood that contingency itself is necessary for the realization of the Idea. According to Peirce, a Third is similarly impossible without a First and a Second; any Third must impart some general quality (a First) to the reactions (Seconds) which it governs. If there is a conflict between Hegel and Peirce here, it has to do not with whether the final category includes or transcends the other two (it does both), but whether or not the less complex categories have an independent status. Peirce recognizes three modes of discrimination: dissociation, prescision and distinction. A phenomenon may be dissociated from another if it can be imagined without that other, as in the case of red and blue; it may be prescinded if it can be supposed separate even if it is not so imaginable, as space may be prescinded from color; and it may be distinguishable in the case where, although like the shorter in relation to the taller, it is neither dissociable nor prescindible, but nevertheless constitutes a distinct idea. In Peirce's phenomenology a category can be prescinded only from those which are more complex than it is, although each is distinguishable from the others. In contrast, Peirce says that "All the categories of Hegel's list from Pure Being up appear to me very manifestly to involve Thirdness, although he does not appear to recognize it, so immersed is he in this category" (5.79). Peirce is right here, with an important qualification. Pure Being and the other logical categories do involve Peircean Thirdness, but Hegel *does* notice it for the very good reason that they are explicitly categories of thought and not of phenomena in general. In terms of Peirce's categories, Logic, Nature, and Spirit are, respectively, the Firtsness, Secondness, and Thirdness of Thirdness. Again the problem in Peirce's interpretation arises from misconstruing Hegel's intent. If we ask whether simple self-feeling, Hegel's analogue of the phenomenological first, can be prescinded from more complex mental attitudes, Hegel's answer seems to be yes; his constant distinction between what a conscious attitude is "for itself" and what it is "for us," allows that non-complex states may be enjoyed and experienced without any awareness of complex states or categories. It is the perspective of philosophical knowledge ("for us") in which it becomes necessary to see the connections of the simple and complex which may not be apparent to the simpler state considered "for itself." Here what

Hegel is interested in is the most comprehensive of explanations and it is only in this context that Firsts and Seconds are *aufgehoben*. But in this context much the same could be said of Peirce's account of the categories. For Peirce the ideal of conduct is the "development of Reason" which consists in "embodiment" or "manifestation" (1.615); this ideal is a goal because it is at the same time a thorough explanation and the "embodiment" which Peirce speaks of is reason's power to govern qualities and events (i.e. Firsts and Seconds) by rationalizing them. The same emphasis on the finality and inclusiveness of Thirdness appears in Peirce's account of reality as "an affair of Thirdness as Thirdness, that is, in its mediation between Secondness and Firstness . . . Reality consists in regularity. Real regularity is active law. Active law is efficient reasonableness, or in other words is truly reasonable reasonableness. Reasonable reasonableness is Thirdness as Thirdness" (5.121).

The truth of Peirce's charge against Hegel, however, lies in Hegel's failure to have a phenomenology which would be an architectonic basis for the rest of his philosophy. It is not so much that Hegel does not recognize Firsts and Seconds as that he does not see the need to begin philosophy with a phenomenological study of the categories of experience (rather than knowledge), but sees philosophy as essentially dialectical and circular. Peirce, aware of this difference, criticizes Hegel's dialectic as a form of the a priori method of fixing belief; based as it is on our inclinations or hunches it lacks the unique power of the scientific method for self criticism (5.382, 5.385). Peirce claims to follow Kant's architectonic conception of philosophy, even to the extent of deriving metaphysical from logical categories (3.422). In the order of the sciences, philosophy follows mathematics which studies logical possibility alone; philosophy, on the other hand, is a positive science which studies the general features of common experience. In Peirce's conception, philosophy plays Second to the First of Mathematics because it is subject to the compulsions of experience. Accordingly, philosophy is to imitate the experimental sciences by employing a fixed terminology so that its results may be clearly stated and submitted for general verification.

Peirce himself found it difficult to adhere to this ethics of terminology. For example, the pragmatic theory of meaning holds that *the* meaning or ultimate logical interpretant of any intellectual concept is a habit; but Peirce's metaphysical analysis of habit shows that it is a Third, which like a concept, is of a cognitive and significant nature and therefore susceptible of interpretation. Yet Peirce offers the pragmatic theory of

meaning as the outcome of a proof which presumably follows the scientific method. The problem is typical of Peirce's philosophical "proofs" and points not so much to a misuse of his own scientific method, but to the difficulty in the conception of philosophy as a kind of Second.[3] Peirce is more successful when he employs a dialectical method. The general metaphysical purport of pragmatism is to show the unity of thought and action; the conclusion is reached by a series of analogical arguments which involve an extension and modification of the concepts possessed at the beginning of inquiry rather than by adhering to the ethics of terminology. Peirce sometimes articulates an alternative version of philosophical method which allows that "it is of the nature of thought to grow" (2.32), notes the similarities to Hegelian dialectic, but dismisses it as ultimately vague and untrustworthy. In his explicit criticism of the Hegelian method he charges it with omitting the element of chance altogether and therefore being devoid of "living freedom" (6.305). This is a misunderstanding which echoes that of Hegel's phenomenology, assuming as it does that *Aufhebung* is nothing but dissolution. In fact Hegel's conception of method is much like the one which Peirce *uses* to best advantage. For both what is primary is the transition from implicit or abstract purpose to its concrete realization. In his *Encyclopedia* Hegel shows the movement from the bare form of the intention to know what is to the actualization of the purpose in Spirit's self-knowledge. Much of what is encountered along the way is immediate, contingent, or disruptive; the realization of the purpose must overcome these obstacles but it neither eliminates them altogether nor sees them as simply appearances of a necessary order. Part of the purpose is simply to realize itself through its encounters with the immediate and contingent. As Hegel notes in several places the precise sequence of these encounters is of minor importance.

This account of Hegel's method is like Peirce's own description of conduct which seeks an ideal through critical self-control. Peirce never explicitly identifies such reflective conduct with philosophy because it is in conflict with his official view of philosophy as a positive science of experience and because it runs contrary to his proclaimed abhorrence, as a scientific man, of the mixing of theory and practice. Yet some of Peirce's crucial arguments are dialectical in form. In "The Fixation of Belief," for example, Peirce shows that although all the methods considered have the common aim of stabilizing belief, all but the scientific necessarily generate doubts which frustrate their own purpose. Since the

decisive factor in the superiority of the scientific method is its ability to comprehend and criticize its own operations, the parallel with Hegel is more than formal. The community of inquiry which is destined to reflect on its own nature and methods is the rationalization of nature under the influence of critical self-control. It is "concrete reasonableness" whose main deviation from Hegel's Absolute Spirit is its transformation of the latter's cognitive claims into the subjunctive mood.

If Hegel's defect is to underrate the importance of the immediate and contingent, Peirce's problem is an inadequate recognition of the role of Thirdness within philosophy itself. To recognize this Thirdness would be to adopt explicitly the point of view (which is often implicitly at work) that philosophical knowledge depends upon the growth and development of ideas; as it is, Peirce is torn between two conceptions of philosophy. His official view leads to an architectonic model which is unrealizable; for his phenomenology, designed to describe what is present to the mind, in fact presupposes a certain conception of mind. In this respect, Hegel's view that philosophy is a circle seems more appropriate and explains why he has no presuppositionless phenomenology comparable to Peirce's. Although the consideration of Peirce's critique of dialectical philosophy reveals a contradiction in his own approach, it also suggests a way of understanding his arguments and concepts which may be more illuminating than his official methodological pronouncements.

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NOTES

1. References are by volume and paragraph to Peirce's *Collected Papers*.
2. *Encyclopedia*, pars. 405, 407, 472.
3. For a fuller argument along these lines see "Habit and Meaning in Peirce's Pragmatism," in *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, Winter 1973.

Work on this paper was supported by a grant (3213-5038) from the University of Kansas General Research Fund.